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Magdalena Abakanowicz: Recent Work and Arboreal Architecture

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28 minutes, 48 seconds

Speaker: Magdalena Abakanowicz

Transcribed by: Sarah Fuchs

[History of the UC San Diego Visual Arts Department](https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb8298185k)

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Magdalena Abakanowicz: Recent Work and Arboreal Architecture (1994)
History of the UC San Diego Visual Arts Department

Time	Transcription
00:08	[University of California, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3]
00:17	[Dramatic Music]
00:21	[MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ]
00:43	[RECENT WORK]
1:44	Magdalena Abakanowicz: I have spent most of my adult life in Poland behind the iron curtain. This situation [MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ Sculptor] has disadvantage but also advantage because not being seen there I could look at the whole world from this distance and analyze and think and compare and study so looking, for instance, what was going on in art, I understood that in art there is nothing to follow but everything to discover.
2:24	I wanted to manifest myself with large works, large works that could be for me- for me like a shelter, that could create my own space, my own reality, but I had neither material, nor studio.
2:43	So I decided to make the material for my sculptures and I began to weave it. From this woven material, I constructed three dimensional forms.
2:57	The Abakans were made in the 60s and beginning of 70s. They grew to huge cycles of forms. Most of them were made out of sisal threads. I bought old ropes at the harbour or collected old ropes just thrown out, washed them and made the surface.
3:23	This allowed me to be responsible for every square inch and I found it very important to be the creator, not only of the shape, not only of the form, but also of the skin from which the object is built.
3:39	The Abakans were open. They were like shells and the problem of shell is still now present in my work.
3:52	After the Abakans,-- because the Abakans could not continue, it was a discovery. It was a statement and then the thinking about mankind, about humanity, about all the conflict between single men and society, between what we can invent a story and the impossibility to put it into practice became a problem that I begun to- to speak about in my work.
4:30	Now, the quantity was also something very important. Here, I think that the observation of nature explains it because, nature manifest itself with groups in which every single is an individuality but the group, countless quantities of mosquitoes or leaves or birds or ourselves. Everybody is an individuality, every

mosquito is an individuality but together they form this countless quantities, and I am like inserting my groups into this quantities, into this realism.

- 5:24 This figures are shell-like negatives of human body. It's only a fragment. It's like a shadow; it's, as I said, like a shell. And after these figures, this so called schizoic head cycle came, also burlap, because the figures are made out of burlap, also burlap stiffed with different materials. Each one is an individuality. They are important as a group.
- 6:02 This is early 70s. And then the huge cycle of embryology came in the 70s. This is a work composed of 800 elements sewn from different old materials like-- like-- nylon, the material--, cotton that you use in hospitals, this very semi-transparent cotton there as you see there filled with-- with-- threads. They are like cocoons, like brains, like parts of human body or stones or potatoes.
- 6:50 In each exhibition, I arranged this group by myself. It was shown last spring at the Marlborough Gallery in New York, but this work was created in the 70s as research about the expression of human body, it came afterwards, this is a group of 80 so called bags; also made out of burlap, also empty like shells inside, also a fragment of the body.
- 7:32 This is in my one person exhibition in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris, the Museum of Modern Art in Paris town, in my one person exhibition after my exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1980. This was displayed in 1982 and after this display in Paris, my retrospective exhibition in the United States started in different museums.
- 8:04 Each exemplar is, as I said, different. My observation of nature would-- would say that nature like having a pattern never wants to repeat it twice in the exact way. It is like we cannot repeat twice the movement of our hand. I also cannot and don't want to repeat twice this saying, so each piece is at research.
- 8:39 Here, this cage was created in 1981 when the martial laws were imposed in Poland. It was like a manifest against this violence. And as my work on the problem of bag continued after the retrospective I had in Japan in the beginning of 90s.
- 9:13 7000 people from Hiroshima came together and asked the city authorities to commission me a sculpture for Hiroshima. Then they came to me and we discussed what they would like to have because Japan don't build monuments even for heroic events. The monument for Hiroshima is in a park; it is low; it is nearly invisible; it disappears in the landscape, so we decided about the bags.
- 9:52 This is a different form than what you have seen before. It is handleless. It is something between the schizoic heads and the bag. The face can lie, the bag cannot. The 40 casted in bronze bags I installed last year in Hiroshima on a hill

below the city. This hill was a dramatic place to reach people from Hiroshima escaped from the terrible hit of the atomic bomb explosion. So it is now permanently there.

- 10:41 Each, again, is different. I spent a long time in the foundry building up each form. I wanted to express the liquidity and the heat. Both are enborned into bronze. So using bronze I could express something about what happened in this city. Empty, shells that we can fill by means of our imagination.
- 11:25 And the crowds. They are several groups of a-- the problem of quantity of crowd. Crowd that-- still appeared in my life as manifest against something or manifest worshipping leaders or hating or fighting for peace or against this and that, very often manipulated crowd. Very often headless crowds as I show it in this 50 figures in which each one, again, is an individuality.
- 12:15 This was-- This group was in my one person exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in Budapest. It was before our countries got freedom and this exhibition was seen as political manifest and hundred thousand people visited it. It was crowded like in a tram.
- 12:40 This is another crowd which is displayed at-- in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden recently. They are 36 bronze figures larger than human size standing in two rows and each one, again, is a personality.
- 13:08 All the cycles of crowd were born in the 80s and-- and beginning of 90s in my studio in Warsaw. And this-- except the bronze crowd because I worked with a foundry in Italy and I made it there on the spot working on each exemple. Like also here; this is a group of small girls that I elaborated also directly in the foundry in wax and then we casted each exemple. Here, it's the display.
- 13:51 Last spring at the Marlborough Gallery in New York where I have shown this group the first time. They are 30 small figures. Also the face appears but as a separate problem in painting and drawings. I called this cycle "faces which are no portraits." And a— a huge of group of my self-portraits in cotton fiber or in bronze, they all derived from my own face but I deformed them-- them in different way-- simplifying the shape-- the shape-- giving to it more anonymity, so that each time I show only just something about face in general, using my— my own face.
- 15:02 This is in bronze. And the color, I discovered working in the foundry, that bronze is always completely clean from the original patina that its get from the crystallization of the surface that its get from the pouring process. So I-- I discovered those beautiful colours and I left them on the surface without putting any patina on it, just keeping it as it is: alive and natural.
- 15:37 Another face in bronze. I call this cycle "Incarnation."

- 15:44 Animal heads came after.
- 15:52 I call them "Hoofed Mammals." They are animals which are not yet born. I also leave them, as you see, with the-- with the very natural patina that comes out of the casting process directly.
- 16:12 In the beginning of 80s, I was invited to France to Le Creusot where I was encouraged to work with old 19th century molds made for casting of machines, engines, ships, cannons, tanks and so forth, and I have chosen some of this forms and then I removed a lot of elements from it and I discovered, inside a shape like a belly. My reaction was that like the first-- the first car was built on a principle of a horse-- of— of— of a car moved by horses. The first engine was built on-- somehow on-- like on a model of the human body. That's why maybe it's-- this resemblance to a belly. I built glass houses for it. They remain at this glass houses like if they would like to-- to grow or to change or to flourish or just to be protected and not to allow the viewer to touch them.
- 17:43 We are now working on the installation of this pieces in the Storm King Art Center. We already-- we have chosen together a site and it will be installed there permanently for, I mean-- its it will be housed there for-- for-- forever there, let's say. There-- I am very happy with the site and with the way we— we will break them up.
- 18:12 This is a sketch for another work we discussed in Hiroshima. We discussed about a-- a power that could reach the point where the atomic bomb explode. And when I heard about it, my first reaction was I make this sketch. Then, thinking about it I built a sculptures but the-- the idea is to make a tower like the Eiffel Tower, that means it is like built out of net, and greenery would grow from different levels, making the whole sculpture just one green body.
- 19:18 It could flourish in the spring; it could get colours in autumn; it could be a like a symbol of freedom and survival. We are discussing this project. This is just a sketch. We studied the elevators inside the balcony that would be on the top that people could go there to reach the place where the atomic bomb explode. This tower should have 640 meters. It would be the tallest in the world then. And we will see what the future will bring.
- 20:06 Now I would like to show you a video tape about the project of arboreal architecture which is on display here at the gallery and which is, for me, extremely important. It was made for Paris so the video I will show [MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ Sculptor] will show you Paris, the whole context of the project. At the same time, I see it as solution for all huge urban agglomeration. A solution that would eliminate the pollution that would oxygenate air because all the houses are covered again with greenery growing from different levels. Not from the bottom to

the top but from different levels-- on trellis that conduct the irrigation system for the plants.

- 21:05 These buildings are organic. They are on the top with swimming pools and recreation areas and also solar energy collectors to make them energetically self sufficient. In the roots of these buildings see you will see on the video tape, there is place for parking and facilities.
- 21:29 [A Videotape about Arboreal Architecture by Magdalena Abakanowicz] [Dramatic music]
- 21:49 Woman: In 1991, the Paris authorities have organised a competition call for ideas for the extension of the historical axis which crosses the city from the Louvre up to the modern business district, La Défense. The new section of the axis, being the subject of the competition, goes through the suburban town of Nanterre, situated between La Défense and the river Seine.
- 22:18 It will mark the Western entrance to the French capital. The organizers have invited, not only architects, but also artists, among them the Polish sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz. Her project has been selected for farther development.
- 22:42 Magdalena Abakanowicz says: "in contrast to the geometrical impressive forms of La Défense, I propose organic forms of arboreal architecture. A landscape of vertical green buildings, each about 25 floors, completely covered with vegetation. Wine, ivy, and other creepers growing on different levels from the bottom to the top. Each building is enveloped with a trellis supporting the greenery and conducting the irrigation system.
- 23:22 One can imagine that birds, others, and city pigeons could find shelters there. Arboreal architecture reintroduces nature in town on a powerful scale. These forms are like an imprint of organic memory. As the concreation of coral reefs which build shapes close to some existings in nature.
- 23:48 [dramatic music]
- 24:03 The trunks buildings are habitable with flats and maisonettes of different shapes. On the top of each building there are recreation areas with swimming pools etcetera. Branches and structures on the crown of buildings support the solar and wind energy collectors which make it energetically self-sufficient.
- 24:33 In the roots of each building, there are parking places and services. The group of such buildings, covered with vegetation, will create a microclimate strongly oxygenated. To get practical credibility for my ideas, I ask a Manhattan architect Helena Styliwicz [?] Halina Starewicz for collaboration. We elaborated together the principles of construction of particular buildings, prepared drawings and made some computer studies of the different solutions of the project.

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- 25:24 [dramatic music]
- 26:21 The arboreal architecture is an answer to the specific situation of Paris, but, at the same time, could be considered as a solution for more general problems of big metropolis. It transforms spaces, that humanized and polluted, into dwelling places inside the vertical green.
- 26:44 [dramatic music]
- 26:47 It renovates totally the relations of humans with nature and art.
- 26:52 [dramatic music]
- 27:06 Magdalena Abakanowicz: I think that to finish this presentation, I could say that art will remain the most astonishing activity of mankind, deriving from constant struggle between wisdom and madness, between dream and reality in our mind
[MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ Sculptor]
- 27:31 Science open new doors behind which we see other doors. Art do not solve any problems but makes us aware of their existence. It opens our eyes to see and our brain to imagine. To have imagination and to be aware of it, is to benefit from possessing an inner richness and a spontaneous and endless flat of images. It means to see the world in its entirety since the point of the images is to show all that which escapes conceptualization. Thank you.
- 28:16 [Additional Video by Elzbieta Sitek Tomasz Konstantyniuk for TV Wroclaw 1993]
- 28:23 [This Program Is A Production Of UCSD-TV In Conjunction With The Mandeville Gallery]
- 28:29 [The Views, Contents And Opinions Expressed Herein Do Not Necessarily Represent Those Of The University of California]
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